

ESTHER NEWTON MADE ME GAY



A FILM BY JEAN CARLOMUSTO

USA

English with English subtitles

TRT 92 minutes

esthernewtonmademegay.com

Press Contact

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"Some people, within even queer culture, may not know who Esther Newton is, but everybody should know."

- Andrew Peterson, Provincetown International Film Festival

"Jean Carlomusto makes her films with heart, with grace, and with integrity; her Kramer biography was proclaimed for showing him 'warts and all.' Likewise, her portrait of Esther Newton unveils a living, breathing human being, a masculine of center, femme-loving, dog-loving, brilliant and articulate woman..."

- JP Prolman, Queerguru

"This is an amazing documentary about history, huge achievements, relationships, and competence. It will make you emotional, enthralled, and excited. A true embodiment of strength and endurance. To see the world through Esther's eyes is a true privilege."

- Cassandra W, Lesflicks

"Inspired by Margaret Mead and Gertrude Stein, Newton forged a path for queer studies in academia, writing about drag artists and gender roles. *Esther Newton Made Me Gay* celebrates the life, loves, and influence of this pioneering figure in queer studies."

- Garry M. Kramer, Gay City News

"Through the frank recollections of Newton, now in her early 80s, Carlomusto takes in the dawn of gay liberation, infighting within the feminist movement, AIDS activism, and the history of the formation of the idyllic queer community of Fire Island's Cherry Grove. Newton's story is of a life well-lived, full of love affairs with interesting women..."

- James Kleinmann, The Queer Review

"*Esther Newton Made Me Gay* is a 'sigh of relief' capable of empowering and liberating us, by focusing on the construction and recognition of identities and categories that have been somehow left behind. [...] This film is a political witness that values and enriches dialog between generations."

- Jury Statement for Best Documentary Award, Some Prefer Cake (Italy)

"Newton planted the seed from which grew the forest of queer and gender studies that are now heard in academia across the world. [...] This documentary deserves applause for the way it will introduce this great woman to new minds."

- Cláudio Alves, Magazine.HD (Portugal)

LOGLINE

A feature documentary about a pathbreaking cultural anthropologist, dog agility enthusiast and iconic butch lesbian. Now entering her eighth decade writing about queer communities, Esther Newton's life's work has influenced generations of activists and scholars.

SYNOPSIS

ESTHER NEWTON MADE ME GAY explores the life and times of cultural anthropologist Esther Newton. Throughout her career, Esther was a pioneer – questioning and challenging status quo assumptions on gender, sexuality and anthropological methods. Her work inspired generations of scholars to pursue research in what would eventually become the field of LGBTQ+ and Gender Studies.

The film tells her story of awakening to gay life in the 1950's, the women's liberation movement and lesbian-feminism, drag culture and forging a butch identity which for her is now in conversation with trans-masculinity.

Keenly attuned to the cultural and societal forces that shaped her life, Esther guides us through an anthropology of herself, a study influenced by her love for a sport - competitive dog agility - that pairs her aging butch body with her beloved dog teammate on an obstacle course that is constantly changing.

In her persistent efforts to train her body back into shape after numerous health setbacks, we see the intense drive that has helped Esther navigate a lifetime of obstacles she faced in her quest to become who she wanted to be; a butch lesbian, scholar and athlete.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Esther is a pioneer who bravely followed her desires, both in her research and her writing, when few others have dared to. Her pre-Stonewall dissertation, *The Drag Queens: a Study in Urban Anthropology*, was the first anthropological study of a gay community in the USA. Her subsequent book, *Mother Camp*, is a foundational text in LGBTQ Studies.

Esther's life and work weave through some of the most vital histories of the LGBTQ+ movement: drag culture in the Midwest, the birth of Lesbian Feminism, the 1980's Sex Wars, the reclamation of Butch/Femme identities, and the history of Queer space in Cherry Grove, Fire Island, NY.

As an anthropologist, Esther sees the world through a lens of cultural relativity and engagement with ideas. Indeed, she titled a book of her essays, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, to acknowledge the importance of cultural relativity in her life and work. As a takeoff on that title, her clever and devoted students made up t-shirts to honor the impact of Esther's work with the slogan "Esther Newton Made Me Gay." This was a natural choice for the film's title, as Esther helped pave the way for all of us to be visible and to thrive.

Esther's courage, intelligence, sincerity, and expansive approach to queer culture make her a compelling subject of a documentary. In both her professional achievements – and her love of competing with canine companions in the sport of dog agility – Esther's persistent, yet fluid, approach to obstacles thrown in her way mirrors the resilience and adaptability we all need to cultivate in facing the massive changes that surround us.

BIOS

Jean Carlomusto - Director, Producer, Editor, and Cinematographer

Jean Carlomusto is a filmmaker, activist, and interactive media artist whose work explores the complex nature of unique individuals and marginalized populations. Her work has been exhibited internationally in festivals, museums, and on television. In 2022, she was a recipient of the Visual AIDS Vanguard Award for her pioneering work in the AIDS activist video movement. Her Emmy nominated documentary, *LARRY KRAMER IN LOVE & ANGER*, HBO, 2015, was featured at the Sundance Film Festival in the U.S. Documentary Competition and was nominated for two Emmy Awards. She co-produced and directed *SEX IN AN EPIDEMIC*, Showtime, 2011, a powerful retelling of the birth of HIV prevention efforts. Her personal films are often unorthodox investigative reports on subjects that have been all but erased from history. In *TO CATCH A GLIMPSE*, (Museum of Modern Art, NYC, permanent collections), she delved into her family history by trying to find out if the rumors about her grandmother's death -- from an illicit abortion back in 1939 --were true. In *L IS FOR THE WAY YOU LOOK*, which aired on PBS/WNET, she pieced together lesbian history using whatever scraps of gossip and memory she could find into a humorous portrait of a population's creative tussle for visibility and inclusion. Her interactive video altar, *OFFERINGS*, commemorating AIDS activists, has been featured at the Fowler Museum in Los Angeles and toured South Africa as part of the Stop AIDS/Make Art project.

Shanti Avirgan - Producer

Shanti Avirgan is a documentary filmmaker, producer and archival researcher. Since 2013 Shanti has been based in Brooklyn, NY working on feature documentaries and docuseries with filmmakers including Roger Ross Williams, Jehane Noujaim, Paul Haggis, Dan Krauss, Yance Ford, Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, David France, Mike Myers, and Laura Poitras. *Esther Newton Made Me Gay* is the third film by Jean Carlomusto that Shanti has produced.

CREDITS

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY

Jean Carlomusto

PRODUCED BY

Shanti Avirgan

Jean Carlomusto

ARCHIVAL PRODUCER

Olivia Streisand

EDITOR

Jean Carlomusto

CO-EDITOR

Richard Miron

ORIGINAL MUSIC

Gil Tami

DIRECTORS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Alex Rappoport

Jean Carlomusto

David Sampliner

COLORIST

Cody Ranaldo

POST PRODUCTION ASSOCIATE

Carly Richman

FEATURING

Esther Newton

Holly Hughes

Louise Fishman

Amber Holibaugh

Shaka McGlotten

Tom "Panzi" Hansen

Jack Halberstam

Martin Manalansan

Gayle Rubin

METADATA

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| Type | Feature Documentary |
| Genre & Themes | LGBTQ+, Anthropology, Biography, Queer Elders, Athletics, Dogs |
| Duration | 92 minutes |
| Language | English |
| Production Year | 2022 |
| Country of Origin | USA |
| Color | Color |
| Screen Format/Aspect Ratio | 4K - 16:9 Widescreen |
| Audio | Stereo |
| Export | DCP |
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